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ABSTRACT

This report on strategies for overcoming employment barriers for persons with visual impairments summarizes comments and suggestions of 7 focus groups comprised of either consumers (n=49) or employers (n=19). The report first reviews the literature concerning employment barriers and how consumers in previous studies suggested these barriers be overcome, followed by the results and analysis of the consumer focus groups. Then, in a similar fashion, it reviews the literature concerning employment barriers and the focus group suggestions from the employers' standpoint. Barriers discussed are broken down into those concerned with employment, negative attitudes, transportation, print access, and employment preparation. Suggestions address such issues as consumer involvement in the Individualized Plan for Employment, provision of orientation and mobility services, procurement policies and procedures for assistive technology, and counselor willingness to recognize the consumer's "right to fail." Four appendices include the consumer and employer protocols, the consumer and employer background information forms, and the consent form. (Contains 25 references.) (DB)

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Technical Report

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Consumer and Employer Strategies for Overcoming Employment Barriers

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Consumer and Employer Strategies for Overcoming Employment Barriers

Persons who are blind or severely visually impaired encounter a plethora of obstacles in their efforts to obtain employment. The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University (MSU) conducted a series of focus groups with consumers and employers to identify rehabilitation techniques or reasonable accommodations to address employment barriers faced by persons who are blind or visually impaired. This report summarizes comments and suggestions developed through the focus group dialogue.

This report includes two components. The first is a brief review of the literature concerning employment barriers and how consumers in previous studies suggested these barriers be overcome, followed by the results and discussion of the results of consumer focus groups. The second component similarly reviews the literature concerning employment barriers and how they are overcome from the employers standpoint. Not surprisingly, there is considerably more literature regarding the existence of barriers as opposed to how they are overcome.

Statement of Problem

The RRTC received funding to conduct this study from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR). This project is one of a series of projects conducted by the RRTC concerning how persons who are blind or severely visually impaired overcome employment barriers. The specific research questions targeted by this project were: *What rehabilitation techniques/reasonable accommodations have been successful in facilitating employment of persons who are legally blind?* and *What rehabilitation techniques/reasonable accommodations can be implemented by rehabilitation counselors and employers to assist persons with visual impairments in overcoming employment barriers?*

Focus Group Methodology

Qualitative methodology, and specifically, use of focus groups, was employed in an effort to facilitate a structured discussion of strategies/techniques to overcome employment barriers. It was hypothesized that various

strategies/techniques to overcome employment barriers are being utilized that are innovative, but unrecognized as such, by persons involved in the rehabilitation process. It was anticipated that focus groups would lead consumers and employers into a discussion of their experiences and ideas, thus revealing previously utilized, but perhaps not disseminated, approaches to overcoming employment barriers. Focus groups have an established history of use in gathering opinions, exploring topics, and facilitating discussion of shared experience (Fontanta & Frey, 2000, p. 645). Focus group data is not typically generalized to a larger population. Rather, the goal is to gain more in-depth information about a specific topic. It is the expectation that, consistent with the concept of transferability (Krueger, 1998, p.70), the reader will examine the results and determine whether the proposed suggestions can be applied to another setting.

Literature Review Regarding Consumers

It is well documented that people with disabilities encounter obstacles when pursuing employment. This is particularly true for people who are blind or visually impaired. What is not as well understood are ways to overcome barriers to employment. This literature review begins with a summary of the consumer perspective regarding the most significant barriers facing persons who are blind or visually impaired in their employment efforts and is followed by a more comprehensive review of consumer suggestions regarding how to overcome these barriers. The most significant barriers, as reflected by a survey of consumers, are attitudes of employers and the general public, transportation problems, limited accessibility to print and/or adaptive equipment, and lack of preparation for employment (Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, & Moore, 1998).

Summary of Employment Barriers

Attitudes of both employers and the general public concerning people who are blind or visually impaired present a major barrier to employment. Evidence of this can be found in everyday expressions used in our society, such as, "the blind leading the blind," "blind rage," and even "blind ambition," all of which imply that blindness is something negative involving attributes like foolishness, ignorance, or incompetence (Conley-Jung & Olkin, 2001). In their study of consumers with visual disabilities, Salomone and Paige (1984) found negative attitudes of employers and the general public to be the most common barrier

confronted by those consumers. These consumers indicated the general public were typically ignorant of the capabilities of people with visual impairments, focusing instead on their disability. More recently, a survey of consumers who were employed and those seeking employment identified "employer attitudes" as the main obstacle encountered (Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1997). Women and minorities who are blind or visually impaired tend to experience "double negative" public attitudes, meaning they are subject to stereotypes about people with visual disabilities and public stereotypes regarding gender. Women who are blind or visually impaired report being underestimated in terms of job skills (Corn, Muscella, Cannon, & Shepler, 1985).

A second barrier to employment encountered by people who are blind or visually impaired involves transportation, a topic prevalent in many discussions of blindness-related issues. In a survey of consumers with visual disabilities, all respondents rated inadequate transportation resources as the number one barrier to successful employment (Malakpa, 1994). McBroom (1995) surveyed successfully employed college graduates with visual impairments concerning the major barriers they faced and found transportation difficulties consistently rank at the top of the list.

Limited accessibility to print and/or adaptive equipment has been identified as another barrier to successful employment for people with visual disabilities. Access to print may include signage, periodic notices, or general information, but typically refers to reading and writing on a regular basis as part of locating, securing, and maintaining successful employment. A survey of successfully employed college graduates with visual impairments rated print access and computer access as major difficulties during their transition from school to work (McBroom, 1995). Related to issues with print access is limited accessibility to adaptive equipment. Adaptive technology tends to lag behind mainstream technology, and in cases where technology is available, employers are not always willing to make the purchase (Mather, 1994). In an earlier, similar study, consumers rated financing assistive devices as a major employment concern (Wolffe, Roessler, & Schriner, 1992).

Lack of employment preparation has been identified as a major barrier to successful employment by people with visual disabilities. Specifically, people who are blind or visually impaired are not receiving the training necessary to be competitive in today's job market. In their research concerning the views of consumers who were not successful in retaining competitive employment, Salomone and Paige (1984) found that insufficient vocational training and career

planning experience were major barriers. Similarly, when members of the American Council of the Blind (ACB) were surveyed regarding their experiences with rehabilitation service delivery systems, skill development in job search strategies and education about career opportunities were cited by consumers as barriers to employment where improved service was needed (Wolffe, Roessler, & Schriner, 1992).

For a more detailed review of employment barriers, readers are referred to "Comprehensive Examination of Barriers to Employment Among Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired" (1998) by Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, and Moore. Major barriers cited by consumers have been reviewed above. The question then becomes a matter of how those barriers can be overcome. Strategies to overcome the major barriers to employment are discussed in the following section.

Overcoming Employment Barriers

Negative Attitudes

Negative attitudes of both employers and the general public are a major barrier encountered by people with visual disabilities when attempting to secure employment. An important method of improving public perceptions suggested by visually impaired consumers involves public education and increased awareness activities, such as successful individuals who are visually impaired becoming more active in educating their community about the abilities of people with visual impairments (Salomone & Paige, 1984). Another study of consumers' perceptions of barriers noted similar recommendations by consumers for a major public education effort, much like the federal anti-smoking campaign (O'Day, 1999).

Transportation

Transportation is another major barrier to employment encountered by people who are blind or visually impaired. At the present time the relatively few solutions suggested by consumers are not equally available to all consumers with visual impairments. Solutions suggested include relocating to a larger city with a better public transportation system (Salomone & Paige, 1984), riding with co-workers, and working from home (Rumrill, Schuyler, & Longden, 1997), all of which focus on the consumer making adjustments to deal with the barrier. A proposed solution that does not focus on the consumer involves improving public

transportation (Rumrill et al., 1997). Transportation issues may also involve orientation and mobility skills, such as learning how to move around the office. In a study conducted by Young (1994), successfully employed people who were legally blind cited learning to travel, both to and around the workplace, as an essential skill for obtaining competitive employment.

Print Access

Limited accessibility to print and/or adaptive equipment has been identified by consumers as another important employment barrier. Consumers in one study (Rumrill et al., 1997) suggested solutions such as personal assistants, dictation machines, and direct communication with other offices within the workplace to address the print access issue. Other possible solutions include consulting with employers to provide reasonable accommodations and following Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines to request accommodations. Consumers also suggested that employees with visual disabilities request no-cost or low-cost solutions, such as window coverings to reduce glare or installation of Braille and/or large print signage.

Employment Preparation

Consumers with visual disabilities often cite lack of training and employment preparation as major barriers to competitive employment. Related to this is a lack of awareness among consumers with visual disabilities concerning what employment opportunities are available. Consumers in one study noted that friends and the state agency for the blind were helpful (Kirchner, Johnson, & Harkins, 1997). Suggestions made by consumers to overcome these barriers include increasing the career awareness and career education of persons with visual impairments while they are still in elementary and high school. Specifically, teachers, counselors, and administrators should include more job-related curricula and begin job placement efforts while the consumers are still in school. Additionally, consumers advocated the establishment of more training programs for manual job skills (Salomone & Paige, 1984). Consumers also suggested training in basic computer skills starting in high school (O'Day, 1999).

Summary of Existing Strategies to Overcome Employment Barriers

It is clear from the above discussion that people with visual disabilities continue to encounter a number of barriers when pursuing competitive employment. Studies, such as those cited above, list consumer suggestions regarding ways to overcome employment barriers. These consumer-suggested strategies include educating the public and potential employers about blindness and low vision; finding alternate ways of getting to work, such as relocating to a more metropolitan area with public transportation or riding with coworkers; consulting with employers to provide reasonable accommodations; and beginning career education of children with a visual impairment in elementary school. Even with these suggestions provided by consumers, much still needs to be done for people with a visual impairment to overcome barriers to employment. It is worth noting that researchers in one study noted an improvement in one area may influence another area, creating a snowball effect of positive results. Gillies, Knight, and Baglioni (1998) suggest that if service providers provide pre-employment training, the number of people with visual disabilities in the workforce would increase, thus promoting a positive attitude among coworkers that could transfer to the general public.

Consumer Focus Group Methodology

Sample

A volunteer sample was utilized for participation in focus groups. Group participants were solicited through various means. Contact was made with leaders from the American Council of the Blind (ACB) and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) to enlist assistance in allowing the focus group to be conducted during their national conference. Both consumer organizations were cooperative in scheduling the focus groups during their annual conferences. An announcement of the focus groups and a request for participants was published in the *Worksight*, a newsletter produced by the MSU RRTC on Blindness and Low Vision. Requests for volunteers were also published in consumer journals and on consumer listservs.

Initial efforts to generate volunteer participants prior to the conference did not generate adequate numbers to conduct two focus groups at each conference. Therefore, contact was made with leaders in each consumer group and assistance in recruiting participants requested. Largely through the efforts of these consumer leaders, an adequate number of participants were identified.

Instrumentation

An interview protocol was developed to direct the content of the focus groups and to promote systematic data collection and analysis (Krueger, 1998). Because previous consumer research (Corn, Muscella, Cannon, & Shepler, 1985; Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, & Moore, 1998; Salomone & Paige, 1984) identified employer attitudes as a major barrier to employment, focus group attention was first directed toward techniques to overcoming that barrier. Previous research also identified transportation (McBroom, 1995; Rumrill, Schuyler, & Longden, 1997; Salomone & Paige, 1984) and print access issues (Crudden et al., 1998; McBroom, 1995; Rumrill et al., 1997) as major barriers. Consequently, these issues were specifically addressed with consumer group participants. After proceeding through these three major barriers, participants were asked to describe other strategies or techniques helpful in overcoming any other employment barrier, or to describe significant experiences in overcoming employment barriers. To see a copy of the interview protocol, refer to Appendix A.

To pilot test the focus group protocol, members of the Mississippi chapter of NFB participated in a focus group session. Subsequently, minor changes were made to the protocol. Specifically, an introductory question regarding the major barrier encountered in seeking employment was eliminated as it resulted in participants spending a significant portion of the available time discussing barriers, rather than potential strategies to overcome barriers. Removal of this introductory question did not totally resolve this problem. Facilitators had difficulty throughout all focus groups in generating meaningful discussion of strategies to overcome employment barriers. Understandably, participants found it much easier to discuss barriers rather than solutions. In response to participant comments or time constraints, the researcher made minor changes to the protocol on an as-needed basis.

Procedure

At each focus group participants were seated at a large table and tape recorders placed at two locations on the table. Prior to any discussion, participants were read a statement of informed consent approved by the MSU Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (see Appendix B). Each participant was asked to sign the statement of informed consent and to complete a brief form providing basic demographic data (see Appendix C).

In an effort to make participants comfortable, facilitate a cooperative atmosphere, and promote participation, snacks were provided at each focus group session. Snacks included non-alcoholic beverages and items such as cookies, popcorn, pretzels, and/or candy.

All focus groups were audio taped. The audio tapes were later transcribed. Two researchers attended each focus group session. One researcher facilitated the group discussion while the other took notes, monitored taping equipment, and provided participants with assistance on an as-needed basis. The moderators debriefed immediately after each focus group to identify impressions and highlights, furthering the systematic approach to data collection.

Analysis

Questions in the focus group sessions were carefully sequenced to facilitate systematic data analysis. Transcripts were subjected to content analysis and themes were identified and coded. The specific research questions directed the

analysis, thus the identification of strategies and techniques to overcome barriers to employment was the focus of the data analysis.

Subjects

A total of 49 persons participated in focus group discussions. Of these, 20 were interviewed at the NFB annual conference, 20 at the ACB annual conference, and 9 at the NFB of Mississippi annual state conference. One sighted employer who was not an NFB member attended an NFB focus group. Of the participants, 57% were female (n = 28) and most (86%) had received vocational rehabilitation services. Participants included 42 who were currently employed, one homemaker, 2 retired persons, and 4 persons seeking employment. Of the working participants, job tenure ranged from a few months to 34 years, with 76% employed from 1 to 15 years; the median length of employment was 6 years.

Results

Readers should be alerted to the fact that focus group participants did, as is typical, stray at times from the interview protocol. Participants sometimes engaged in meaningful dialogue either unrelated, or marginally related, to the research question. The most common example of this was the tendency of the participants to speak at length about barriers as opposed to suggestions regarding how to overcome them. Only a small number of these comments have been included here as this was not the focus of the research.

Overcoming Negative Attitudes Toward Persons with Visual Impairments

Consumers discussed employer attitudes and negative attitudes of co-workers, rehabilitation professionals, family members, the general public, and even others with visual impairments. Some participants held rehabilitation providers partly responsible for perpetuating the negative attitudes held by others, either because the rehabilitation provider shared the negative belief or did not make sufficient efforts to dispel negative attitudes in others. Comments included the following:

> *We have rehabilitation professionals who have not worked through their feelings about people with disabilities. They think they are doing us a favor by employing us or thinking they are going to get us an entry level job.*

Consumers emphasized the need to educate all parties about the skills, abilities, and resources available to persons with visual impairments as a means of overcoming this employment barrier. A typical suggestion was to ask employers who have had positive experiences with employees who are blind to serve as references. Educational information could be provided by rehabilitation providers, other employers, or persons with visual impairments. One consumer suggested:

> *Get local employers involved. Get them on your Board of Directors. Target key local business people.*

Consumers suggested that employers be educated individually and in groups, such as civic groups or professional organizations. Education should address issues such as the types of assistive technology available, how accessible the technology is, its cost, and means of procuring it. Participants also suggested that employer-consumer relations are enhanced when employers are not placed in the position of being solely responsible for job modifications. Participants recommended that the person with the visual impairment take the lead in making the employer aware of the worker's abilities and willingness to suggest, devise, and/or implement effective modifications. However, participants did express the necessity of educating recalcitrant employers through advocacy and formal reporting mechanisms. Examples of comments included:

> *Employers who don't hire blind people simply don't know what our capabilities are, don't know the realities about what equipment costs.*

Participants stated that employers, and others with negative attitudes, must be confronted with their personal prejudices about blindness. Positive contact with persons with visual impairments is one method of addressing this barrier. However, participants stated that some persons, including employers, rehabilitation providers, or family members, are so entrenched in their negative belief system about blindness that the only alternative is avoidance. One participant suggested:

> *If this is the first blind guy they've hired they feel uncomfortable. The employees may feel uncomfortable. Scared they'll say the wrong thing, the politically incorrect thing. You have to go in and educate them and it can be a fun thing.....You go in and you show them that everybody is exactly the same.*

While the thrust of the data collection effort was directed toward identifying strategies or methods to overcome employment barriers that could be implemented by employers or rehabilitation providers, participants frequently suggested methods that persons with visual impairments could use to overcome employment barriers. Again, education is a key component of these strategies, with participants indicating that if persons who are blind or visually impaired present themselves as

capable individuals, they will serve as examples to the public. Suggestions included participation in community activities, such as Neighborhood Watch. Participants recommended that persons with visual impairments gain formal and informal support from others with visual impairments as a means for increasing self-esteem and solidarity, as well as the availability of information about employment expectations and opportunities.

Participants were strongly supportive of persons with visual impairments being educated from a very young age regarding expectations for independence and employment success, adaptive skills, assistive technology, and specific supports available. However, participants cautioned that persons with visual impairments not be socialized to be dependent on the rehabilitation system. An example of comments included:

> *People must have good self-esteem before they can go out and effectively talk with an employer. You have to be assertive.*

and

> *You have to be absolutely determined that you are going to get a job. You sell yourself and you do not take NO for an answer.*

Overcoming Transportation Barriers

Strategies employers can use to overcome the transportation barrier included acceptance of a flexible schedule, increased latitude in working from an off-site location, negotiated rates with cab companies, utilizing volunteers or retired persons, and employer-provided or employer-subsidized transportation.

Rehabilitation providers can assist in efforts to overcome transportation barriers by engaging in advocacy efforts to promote accessible and reliable public transportation and/or paratransit systems. Additionally, assuring that persons with visual impairments have access to quality orientation and mobility training promotes consumer independence, thus reducing the transportation barrier. Rehabilitation providers were faulted for not making greater efforts to assist consumers with resolving transportation barriers. Consumers suggested increased rehabilitation counselor involvement in devising transportation plans with

employers, coworkers, and other populations facing transportation barriers. One participant commented:

> *A lot of people move to the area they are going to work in. But I think it is unfair for a rehabilitation counselor who has found a job to say, "If you want this job you will do anything to get it."*

As with attitudinal barriers, participants provided suggestions for others with visual impairments in overcoming transportation barriers. These suggestions included relocating to be closer to the job or a source of transportation, increasing orientation and mobility skills to promote confidence and ability to use public transportation, networking with coworkers and others to arrange transportation, developing relationships with transportation providers (public and private) in hopes of promoting increased reliability, and political advocacy to develop and/or improve existing public and paratransit systems. Persons with visual impairments were cautioned to be persistent in efforts to address transportation issues. Comments included:

> *You can't give up....Their answer is always to move someplace convenient for the transit...So, you keep calling and you keep taking the next number they give you and you keep doing it.*

Overcoming Print Access Barriers

Use of assistive technology was the typical method most participants use to overcome barriers to print access. However, participants experienced numerous difficulties in obtaining, learning to use, and keeping current with assistive technology. Participants stated that rehabilitation providers can assist persons with visual impairments in overcoming the print access barrier by correctly identifying the appropriate equipment and insuring that the consumer has quality and timely training on its use. Participants stated that employers appear reluctant to hire persons needing expensive assistive technology and that financial assistance from rehabilitation providers is critical to successful job placement. Comments included:

You need a computer at home to practice. You can't just go to a class one or two days a week and remember next week what you learned.

Participants were emphatic that assistive technology be acquired in a timely manner so that consumers are confident about accepting employment and so that employers do not experience a period of "down time" where the person with a visual impairment is unable to work due to lack of equipment or having the wrong equipment. Participants suggested that assistive technology be purchased and disseminated while the consumer is in the interviewing phase, or before employment occurs, believing that doing so would make the consumer more confident in the interviewing process. Consumers also stated that equipment should be routinely upgraded or adapted to comply with the employer's technology and technological advances.

We (consumers) streamlined them (VR). We streamlined their purchasing procedure. It used to take four months to get adaptive technology, now it takes four days because now they don't have to go to a special list. It was a matter of straightening out the system so that the system could serve clients. That's the job of the rehabilitation agency.

Ownership of equipment was also a factor. Participants wanted the equipment to become the property of the consumer, believing that ownership gives the consumer increased autonomy and flexibility to change jobs. Participants stated that all equipment should travel with the consumer when job movement occurred, thus improving opportunities for upward mobility.

Participants also stressed that rehabilitation providers assist in locating and accessing quality assistive technology training programs for consumers. Respondents commented that delays have occurred when the technology was available, yet the consumer had either not received training or the training was inadequate.

Education for employers was also discussed. Participants suggested that rehabilitation providers train employers regarding what type of equipment is available to assist persons with visual impairments, how the rehabilitation agency can assist with costs associated with acquiring equipment, how the rehabilitation

agency can assist with incorporating assistive technology into the employer's system, and how the rehabilitation agency can provide ongoing support for system upgrades and/or repairs. Comments included:

> *Rehabilitation counselors must do education, talk to employers, break down some of these barriers. It is essential that somebody is doing that and it can best be done by a professional.*

and

> *You need entre. You need somebody to be the team manager. You can't go into a place cold as one small blind person and do it. You probably don't have all the answers. A good job developer could go in and negotiate job tasks or trade off some job tasks to reconstruct the job so a blind person could be successful. It would be a win-win situation.*

Even when contact between the employer and the rehabilitation professional occurs, participants stressed the importance of interviewing being between the applicant and employer only. Comments included:

> *You can't let the agency do the work for you. You must go in and interview and do your own impressing. If you let somebody else go in there and do it for you they are likely to say something that you're not going to want. Don't get discouraged. You have to be assertive.*

Another method to access print used by focus group participants was the use of readers. Respondents expressed concern regarding identifying competent readers. A variety of sources used to obtain readers included volunteers, persons they hired to act as readers and drivers, and coworkers. Employers can facilitate job sharing to promote teamwork among visually impaired and sighted workers.

Focus group participants voiced concern that persons with visual impairments were not aware of their rights under the ADA, and thus did not request accommodations. Rehabilitation providers could facilitate consumer

training in ADA rights and responsibilities and how consumers can request accommodations in a timely and cooperative manner.

> *We need to make sure people are aware of their rights.*
> *Aware of what the laws are and how they are affected.*

Summary

Focus group participants who successfully overcame employment barriers suggested that ***rehabilitation providers*** utilize the following strategies/methods to assist others who are blind or severely visually impaired in overcoming employment barriers:

1. Educate employers and the general public, individually and in groups, about the skills and abilities of persons who are blind or visually impaired. Use employers with successful experiences as references. Work in conjunction with local community agencies.
2. Educate employers about the types of assistive technology available, its costs, means of procuring it, and how the rehabilitation agency can assist with identifying, purchasing, installing, upgrading, and repairing assistive technology. Attend job fairs.
3. Promote positive contact between employers and persons who are blind or visually impaired.
4. Advocate and promote development and maintenance of accessible and reliable public transportation or paratransit systems.
5. Be involved in devising transportation plans with employers and coworkers.
6. Insure access to quality orientation and mobility training.
7. Provide accurate and timely evaluation services to determine what assistive technology is needed to perform a given job.
8. Obtain quality and timely training for consumers regarding the use of assistive technology.
9. Provide financial assistance with purchasing, installing, upgrading, and servicing assistive technology.
10. Develop policies that make assistive technology the possession of the consumer, rather than the employer.
11. Educate consumers about their rights and responsibilities under the ADA and how to request accommodations in a timely and cooperative manner.

Focus group participants suggested that ***employers*** utilize the following strategies/methods to assist others who are blind or severely visually impaired in overcoming employment barriers:

1. Be open to information from rehabilitation providers and persons with visual disabilities regarding employment options.
2. Provide flexible schedules to accommodate transportation problems.
3. Allow employees to work from off-site locations.
4. Provide or subsidize transportation for workers.
5. Work with the rehabilitation provider and coworkers to resolve transportation problems.
6. Cooperate with the employee and the rehabilitation provider in identifying, purchasing, installing, upgrading, and repairing assistive technology.

Employer Focus Groups

Literature Review

A previous section highlighted consumers' perceptions of major barriers to employment. However, it is also important to understand the employer perspective regarding barriers to employment facing people with visual disabilities. Although employers have differing perspectives concerning details of employment barriers, they agree on the most frequently encountered problems.

This literature review begins with a summary of the employer perspective regarding the most significant barriers facing persons who are blind or visually impaired in their employment efforts and is followed by review of employer suggestions regarding how to overcome these barriers. Employers and consumers agree that employer attitudes, transportation, and access to print are major employment barriers (Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, & Moore, 1998).

Summary of Employment Barriers

Several studies found persons who are blind are perceived by employers as least likely to be hired and hardest to accommodate. Employers rate severe mental retardation and blindness as the most difficult disabilities to accommodate (Combs & Omvig, 1986). A survey of the attitudes of employers in the Midwest and Southeast found persons with visual impairments, mental retardation, or mental illness least likely to be hired (Gilbride, Stensrud, Ehlers, Evans, & Peterson, 2000). In an employer focus group, employers listed negative attitudes and prejudice as the most significant employment barriers (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995).

Transportation is another key barrier for people with visual impairments pursuing employment. Despite studies indicating transportation is a major consumer concern (Malakpa, 1994; McBroom, 1995; Rumrill, Schuyler, & Longden, 1997; Salomone & Paige, 1984), there is a notable lack of research concerning employers' interest in this barrier. In round table discussions, employers mentioned that transportation issues are often beyond the experience of employee support departments (Fry, 1998).

A third employment barrier identified by employers involves print access, which relates to issues of accommodation. Lee (1996) surveyed 500 companies in New Jersey and found employers listing quadriplegia and blindness as the

disabilities most difficult to accommodate. Employers in one study worried about the cost of accommodation (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995). Related to this is the fact that some employers are uncertain and concerned about how to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Gilbride, Stensrud, & Connolly, 1992) and are often misinformed about the law (Walters & Baker, 1996).

Overcoming Employment Barriers

Negative Attitudes

Employers admit they have negative attitudes about hiring persons with visual disabilities. Suggested ways of overcoming this barrier include education and training to modify public and employer attitudes (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995). Simply hiring one person with a visual disability may be enough to facilitate attitude change. Diksa and Rogers (1996) found employers with a history of hiring people with disabilities had more favorable attitudes toward hiring people with disabilities than employers with little or no experience with this population. A suggested method of improving attitudes about accommodation involved equating the provision of accommodation for a worker with a disability with the provision of tools or some other personal accommodation to non-disabled workers (Berkeley, 1982).

Transportation

Employers typically do not provide transportation. However, they sometimes provide accommodations to sighted employees that facilitate transportation, such as free parking or subsidized parking. The transportation barrier was mentioned in the literature but no research could be located specifically addressing employer solutions or awareness of this barrier.

Print Access and Accommodation

Employers often worry about the cost of accommodations when hiring a person with a disability (Fabian, Luecking, & Tilson, 1995). Corporate leaders (Berkeley, 1982) recommended that to improve hiring of persons with disabilities, companies provide a special centralized budget for accommodations, and the federal government should provide a tax credit or some other funding mechanism

to pay for accommodations. Since employers appear wary of and misinformed about the ADA (Gilbride, Stensrud, & Connolly, 1992; Walters & Baker, 1996), education and training concerning the law may be one strategy to overcome this barrier.

Summary of Employer Suggested Strategies to Overcome Employment Barriers

It is interesting that employers list their own negative attitudes as barriers to employment of people with disabilities, including persons with visual disabilities. Education and training of employers seems necessary to reduce the barriers of negative attitudes and print access/accommodation. Unfortunately, employers offer little or no suggestions concerning the transportation barrier, although they appear to recognize its importance as a barrier once it is pointed out to them. The fact that employers recognize there are significant barriers for people with disabilities pursuing employment is an important first step, but the process of overcoming those barriers must be addressed.

Sample

Four major metropolitan areas (Atlanta, Dallas, Phoenix, and San Francisco) were targeted for conduct of employer focus groups. Staff from the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) in the Atlanta, Dallas, and San Francisco offices and employees of the Texas Commission for the Blind and Arizona Industries for the Blind served as liaisons with the researchers and assisted in identifying employers for participation in the focus groups and making practical arrangements (identifying a meeting site, negotiating costs, etc.) to conduct the focus group sessions. Attempts to conduct a focus group in Atlanta were terminated due to inability to identify a sufficient number of employers for participation.

The sample is considered purposive, in that members were asked to participate if they were employers with experience employing persons with disabilities. It was also a volunteer sample as it consisted of employers contacted by a liaison who agreed to participate. Data regarding those who declined to participate is not available. One employer participated whose company did not employ persons with disabilities, and a retired employer also participated in a focus group session.

Instrumentation

The focus group protocol was adapted from the protocol used with consumers (see Appendix D). Employers were asked to address each of the most frequently identified employment barriers associated with blindness and low vision. Employers were also queried regarding hiring practices. As with consumers, efforts were made to direct the content of the discussion to facilitate data analysis. However, the researcher did make minor changes to the protocol during the session as deemed necessary by the flow of conversation or time constraints.

Procedure

Each focus group was conducted at a large table and was audio-taped. Prior to the discussion, participants signed a similar statement of informed consent presented to consumers (see Appendix B). Each member also completed a brief form with basic demographic data (see Appendix E). Most employers offered copies of their business cards to the researchers.

In an effort to promote attendance, lunch was provided. Having the dialogue over a meal lent a more informal air to the proceedings, thus allowing employers to more easily become engaged in conversation. One researcher conducted the Dallas session; the remaining two sessions included two researchers, one facilitating the session and the other monitoring taping equipment. Cards with each participants' name were placed on the table to assist each in remembering the names of the others.

Analysis. Data analysis proceeded as described with consumer group analysis. Tapes of the sessions were transcribed and subjected to content analysis. Themes were identified and coded. Information that addressed the research question were grouped and coded.

Subjects. A total of 19 employers participated in the focus group discussions. Of these, 4 were interviewed in Dallas, 10 in Phoenix, and 5 in San Francisco. Of the participants, 79% were female (n = 15) and most (84%) worked for a for-profit business. Participants included 9 employed in human resources, 9 in management, and one retired employer. Of the current employers, most

employed someone with a disability and 89% employed someone with a visual disability.

Results

Overcoming Negative Attitudes Toward Persons with Visual Disabilities

Employers recognized that persons who are blind or visually impaired encounter negative attitudes from both employers and coworkers during the hiring process and on the job. One employer commented:

> *I think it is important to recognize that often times what we see as mediaeval attitudes and fears are actually the individual, the hiring supervisor or manager's own fear of becoming disabled.*

To address this barrier, employers discussed the importance of job applicants, including persons with visual disabilities, understanding the corporate culture of the potential employer. Employers stated that this was a vital part of the interviewing, job acquisition, and promotion process. Employers suggested that persons with visual disabilities learn as much as possible about the employer prior to the job interview and recommended use of a job developer, or other liaison, to assist in obtaining information that might be more readily apparent to sighted applicants through visual cues. By having a sense of the corporate culture, applicants increase the level of comfort of the potential employer and therefore increase the likelihood of being hired.

Employers stated that it is helpful to have a third party, either within the company (such as a human resources officer) or outside the company (such as a rehabilitation counselor or job developer) provide education to the management and staff regarding social and vocational issues concerned with hiring a person with a visual disability and to advocate for hiring persons with visual disabilities. The use of a third party allows employers and coworkers the opportunity to ask questions and obtain information in a setting more comfortable to them, thus making them more comfortable and accepting of a person with a visual disability.

Social interaction following employment is also an issue. Employers recommended the use of mentors or coworkers to work with employees with disabilities to facilitate social integration on the job. The use of mentors is

particularly helpful to promote participation in activities that occur outside the workplace. Still other employers recommended refinement of social skills through participation in protocol schools run by private businesses. Focus group participants mentioned that it is becoming increasingly common for new employees to participate in such programs and persons who are blind or visually impaired would likely benefit from similar programs.

Educating employers through positive experiences with people who are blind or visually impaired was also suggested. The importance of the employer's first contact with a blind employee or job applicant being a positive experience was stressed by employers. One employer stated:

> *Business attitudes are driven by individual attitudes. Individual attitudes change with experience.*

Some employers stated that attitudes are changing already, and that increased exposure to and experience with persons who are blind or visually impaired has positively impacted employer attitudes.

Overcoming Transportation Barriers

Employers whose communication with employees was primarily electronic or through telephone had little awareness of the transportation barriers encountered by persons who are blind or visually impaired. Other employers stated that employees with visual disabilities appeared to have little difficulty with regular transportation to and from work, but encountered difficulty when attendance was required at a special event, such as a training session. Employers suggested that transportation to and from special events be arranged by the employer and regarded as a routine request. One employer commented:

> *I think it has benefitted all of us to remember we have to address the issue of transportation and accessibility of a facility for everyone who is attending the meeting, whether that be a vegetarian menu, wheelchair accessibility, or whatever it is.*

When workers who are blind or visually impaired rely on public transportation or para-transit systems to get to and from work, employers

recommend that transportation personnel be trained in working with persons with disabilities and that employers advocate for their employees in that regard. Employers also advise developing employee schedules to accommodate public and para-transit system schedules. The use of car companies by some transit systems, as opposed to a mass para-transit system, was noted to be particularly successful in at least one city.

Some employees have taken the initiative in facilitating contacts between coworkers to accommodate transportation problems, particularly for events that occur outside of regular working hours. Other employers are agreeable to arranging transportation but rely on the worker to make the need for assistance known. Some employers subsidize transportation for all employees, regardless of disability status. These subsidies can take the form of bus passes or cash supplements. Still other employers now have company vehicles, usually vans, available to assist in the routine commute to and from work.

In a related area, the use of orientation and mobility training at the job site was suggested as a possible solution to some transportation barriers. These services may be available through a state agency at no cost or may be purchased from a state agency or a private provider on a fee for service basis.

Overcoming Print Access Barriers

The use of computers and associated assistive technology was recognized by employers as the most effective means of overcoming barriers to print access. Employers recommended use of e-mail to distribute inter-office communications to all workers, particularly those with visual disabilities. Magnifying print with a copying machine is sometimes utilized. Use of desktop scanners or a Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) were also mentioned as important parts of print access. Other employers reported that employees who are blind utilize desktop Braille embossers to translate printed material into Braille.

The interface of assistive technology with the employer's computer system was mentioned by employers during the discussion of barriers to print access. Employers recommended that special attention be paid to issues of compatibility when purchasing assistive technology to overcome barriers to print.

Acquisition of assistive technology sometimes presented problems for workers who are blind or visually impaired and their employers. Employers mentioned concern with getting equipment in a timely manner and recommended working with the employee at the first opportunity, ideally before they report to

work, to identify, obtain, and set up assistive technology. Renting assistive technology instead of purchase, or renting until assistive technology could be purchased were suggested as possible solutions. Employers stated that when multiple employees with visual disabilities were employed, it became more cost effective for the employer to purchase assistive technology and for company technical support staff to become familiar with its installation, use, and repair. Employers advocated keeping up-to-date on changes in assistive technology. One employer commented:

> *Most jobs that require you to work with a computer need you to have that software and whatever hardware is needed there the first day. It is not good enough to come in the first day and order it that day.*

When working with assistive technology, employers recommended that the employer, the worker, and any others, such as the rehabilitation counselor or assistive technology specialist, remain in ongoing communication with each other. Focus group participants cautioned that no assistive technology should be purchased without conferring with the worker who has a visual disability.

Some employers recommended the use of readers to assist persons with accessing print on the job. While some employers recommended that a supervisor review and read important documents with workers who are blind or visually impaired, others advocated use of clerical support staff or hiring someone part-time specifically to provide reader services. A designated time slot to review printed information on the job was suggested.

Focus group participants recognized the importance of providing employees with information in adapted format rather than always asking the employee to transfer information into the preferred format. One employer stated:

> *They (employees with visual disabilities) should not have to come to me and say "blow this up for me". I am the manager that is providing the information. I think about these things before I provide it.*

Difficulties encountered by persons who are blind or visually impaired accessing the Internet were known to some of the focus group participants. They stressed the importance of making web site designers and software developers

aware of the needs of persons with visual disabilities. They recommended that rehabilitation providers participate in trade shows and that donated space be solicited on frequently traveled websites to educate others regarding how to make hardware and software useful to persons with visual disabilities. Use of awards to recognize companies and individuals who are exemplars in developing programs and equipment that are accessible was also recommended. The aging of the current population and its growing need for large print was also mentioned by employers who stated that by emphasizing this aspect to hardware and software developers, the stigma of disability was reduced and the increasing demand for accessible products would be more apparent.

Overcoming Other Barriers

Training issues are sometimes a problem faced by employers and persons with visual loss. Employers recommended that additional space be acquired for assistive technology associated with training equipment. Employers also noted that employees who are blind or visually impaired be allotted extra time for training.

When encountering persons who are blind or visually impaired, employers recommended that the focus be on abilities, not the disability. Participants in the focus group advise other employers to select the best applicant for a job, then discuss how the job will be performed. Focus group participants cautioned other employers to be aware of individual differences among people who are blind or visually impaired, and that solutions appropriate for one worker may not be applicable to others. These employers also stressed that providing accommodations is an interactive process that must involve input from all parties involved (i.e., the worker, the employer, the job developer or rehabilitation counselor, and the information technology specialist at the job site).

The personal characteristics of persons who are blind or visually impaired remain an important factor in overcoming employment barriers. Focus group participants recommended that those persons seeking employment remain persistent, take the lead in identifying what accommodations are needed, demonstrate to others that they are comfortable with their vision loss, utilize the assistance of a good career counselor or job developer, and market themselves to get past those who present obstacles.

Summary

Focus group participants, all employers aware of issues surrounding employment of persons with disabilities, suggest that ***rehabilitation providers*** utilize the following strategies/methods to assist persons who are blind or visually impaired in overcoming employment barriers:

1. Recognize that employers must confront their own fears about becoming disabled and work with employers in resolving this issue.
2. Assist job applicants in learning as much as possible about the potential employer, including information about the corporate culture of the employer's organization.
3. Use rehabilitation providers to develop relationships with employers rather than expecting consumers to make initial contacts and establish lines of communication with employers.
4. Work with someone within a company, such as the human resources director, to provide education and advocate for employing persons with visual disabilities.
5. Assist persons with visual disabilities become socially integrated at the job through coordination of mentors.
6. Make business social skills training (protocol schools) available to persons with visual disabilities.
7. Facilitate positive interaction between persons who are blind and severely visually impaired and employers.
8. Provide orientation and mobility training on-the-job.
9. When purchasing equipment for employees, make sure it is compatible with the employers' equipment.
10. Provide assistive technology in a timely manner.
11. Remain in ongoing contact with the worker and the employee.
12. Identify assistive technology with input from the employee.
13. Participate in trade shows to make hardware and software developers aware of the technology needs of persons with visual disabilities.
14. Give awards to hardware and software developers who are responsive to technology needs of persons with visual disabilities.
15. When providing education to the hardware and software developers about the technology needs of persons with visual disabilities, stress the impact

and marketing potential of this technology for persons with age-related vision loss.

Employers in focus groups suggest that other ***employers*** utilize the following strategies/methods to assist persons who are blind or visually impaired in overcoming employment barriers:

1. Assist the employee in developing positive relationships with coworkers, perhaps through the use of assigned mentors.
2. Utilize a rehabilitation professional or human resources person to answer questions and provide training about blindness and assistive technology.
3. Work with employees to resolve transportation problems.
4. Advocate for employees who experience public transportation problems.
5. Provide flexible schedules to accommodate transportation problems.
6. Use a copy machine to enlarge text for large print users.
7. Use e-mail for routine inter-office correspondence.
8. Develop a centralized budget for responding to accommodation requests.
9. Work with the employee to be sure the appropriate equipment is identified for purchase.
10. Rent equipment for temporary use while waiting for equipment purchases to be processed.
11. When purchasing assistive technology, be certain it is compatible with existing company technology. Likewise, when purchasing new company equipment, be certain it is compatible with assistive technology.
12. Provide reader services.
13. Provide information in the requested format. Do not expect the worker to translate everything into the appropriate format.
14. Remain in contact with the rehabilitation counselor.
15. Plan additional training time for persons with visual disabilities.
16. Consider the space needs for assistive technology and plan for these needs for training and work areas.
17. Focus on the worker's abilities, not the disability.
18. Remember that all employees are different. Do not assume that all persons with visual disabilities need the same accommodations or have the same skill levels.

Discussion

Focus group participants were not randomly selected from an existing sample pool. Rather, participants were volunteers who responded to notices or agreed to participate after being contacted by a fellow member of their respective consumer organization, or in the case of employers, after being contacted by a liaison. Consequently, limitations associated with a volunteer sample are indicated (Borg & Gall, 1989). Further, all consumer participants were attending a consumer group annual conference, indicating some degree of awareness and activism in the field of blindness. Consequently, the participants are not presumed to be reflective of the general population of persons who are blind or visually impaired who are employed. Additionally, most employers had experience working in some way with an agency serving persons who are blind and are thus not typical of employers throughout the country.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the results of this study add to the growing body of knowledge and literature on overcoming barriers to employment for persons who are blind or severely visually impaired. The suggestions and recommendations contained herein should prove helpful to both rehabilitation service providers who are actively involved in the placement process as well as employers who are seeking qualified job applicants in the competitive labor market. Given the 1998 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 105-220) and the increased emphasis on informed choice and employment in integrated work settings, it is imperative that the consumer be an active participant in designing and implementing their "Individualized Plan for Employment" (IPE). It is likewise essential that VR agencies ensure that policies and procedures are responsive to consumer needs relative to issues such as relocating to be closer to a job, source of transportation, or the provision of orientation & mobility (O&M) services to provide confidence and ability to use public transportation.

Similarly, procurement policies and procedures should be carefully reviewed to ensure that assistive technology is purchased in a timely and efficient manner to eliminate the "down time" associated with lack of equipment or having the wrong equipment. Policies and procedures related to ownership or decisions regarding who retains title to equipment should likewise be reviewed to ensure maximum ***flexibility*** for the consumer seeking employment or upward mobility and ***accountability*** for the agency charged with maintaining or tracking equipment through a cumbersome property inventory system.

There are inherent limitations placed on both VR agencies and employers such as limited fiscal and human resources, service delivery policies providing for an Order of Selection, and procurement guidelines that vary widely from state to state. Adding to the mix is the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 and the wide variability and availability of VR services in workforce investment areas throughout the United States. While advancing technology will enhance access to print and promote telecommuting opportunities, there is no substitute for the positive attitude change that occurs among employers and the general public through exposure to blind employees in integrated work settings.

Although the approaches and strategies described herein may not be viewed as particularly unique or radically innovative in nature, they do work and work well when utilized in a timely and systematic manner. The authors hoped that some "smoking guns" would be uncovered related to strategies for overcoming barriers to employment. However, there appear to be no magic bullets. Although states operate under the same statute (PL 105 - 220) and the same federal regulatory guidelines (34 CFR Part 361), policies and procedures governing the provision of services and procurement of equipment vary dramatically from state to state. Procedures such as procuring equipment, arranging travel, and post employment services are examples of issues where there is great variation among states.

The attitudes of VR counselors and their willingness to support consumers or recognize their "right to fail" also varies widely as does an employer's willingness to "take a chance" on a blind applicant. Counselors and their supervisors have significant discretion in making decisions regarding service delivery issues that directly impact employment outcomes for individuals who are blind or severely visually impaired.

It is hoped that the suggestions and recommendations made by the consumers and employers who participated in this study will be helpful to rehabilitation service providers and employers in their efforts to employ persons who are blind or severely visually impaired. It is also hoped that the results of this study will stimulate further research related to overcoming barriers and provide better documentation on what works under what conditions and why.

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Appendix A

Consumer Protocol

Appendix A: Consumer Protocol
(revised after pilot)

Introduction and Script

Good morning and welcome to our session. Thank you for joining our discussion on overcoming barriers to employment. My name is _____ and this is _____ and we work at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University. All of you volunteered to participate in this session tody because you support people with visual disabilities. You evidence that both through your membership in this organization, and by coming here today to be in this group. So, I would like before we do anything else to stop here for a few minutes and let everyone introduce themselves. If you could just say your name and where you work and where you are from, I think that would help us get started.

Today, we'll be discussing what can be done to overcome barriers to employment for people with visual impairments. We really want to know about unique and innovative methods that you use or may have heard about that have assisted a person with a visual impairment in becoming employed. There are no wrong answers, but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

Before we begin, let me suggest some things that will make our discussion more productive. Please speak up - only one person should speak at a time. We're tape recording this session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. We'll be on a first-name basis, but in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. You may be assured of confidentiality.

My role here is to ask questions and listen. I won't be participating in the conversation, but I want you to feel free to talk with one another. I'll be asking a few questions, and I'll be moving the discussion from one question to the next. There is a tendency in these discussions for some people to talk a lot and some people not to say much. But it is important for us to hear from each of you because you have different experiences. So if one of you is sharing a lot, I may ask you to let others talk. And if you aren't saying much, I may ask for your opinion.

1. We know that the rate of unemployment for persons who are blind is approximately 75%. One of the major barriers to employment is employer attitudes. Please tell me about the successful methods you have seen used to overcome negative attitudes of employers.

   OK, let me summarize what you have said...Does anyone have additional comments about how to overcome employer attitudes?

2. Transportation has also been identified as a significant barrier for many persons, particularly those in rural areas. What methods have you seen used to successfully overcome the transportation barrier to employment?

   Summarize and ask for additional advice regarding overcoming transportation barriers.

3. Persons who are blind have also identified access to print as a major barrier to employment. What methods have you encountered that were successful in overcoming this barrier to employment?

   Summarize and ask for additional comments regarding print access.

4. Any other comments regarding any other barriers and there solutions (as time allows)

Other comments

Close: Thank members for participation.

Appendix B
Informed Consent

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Statement of Informed Consent

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project on "Overcoming Barriers to Employment" that is being conducted by Dr. Adele Crudden and Dr. Lynn McBroom from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (RRTC) at Mississippi State University.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to hold a group interview to find out about ways that barriers to employment may be overcome by someone who is blind or visually impaired.

I understand that the study involves a focus group interview that lasts two hours or less, which will be audio taped.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that if I wish to withdraw from the study or to leave, I may do so at any time, and that I do not need to give any reasons or explanations for doing so. If I do withdraw from the study, I understand that this will have no effect on my relationship with the RRTC or any other organization or agency.

I understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not sharing any personal information or disclosing any personal information others share that might be considered too personal or revealing.
I understand that I may not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study, but that my participation may help others in the future.

The members of the research team have offered to answer any questions I may have about the study and what I am expected to do.
I have read and understand this information and I agree to take part in the study.

Today's Date:_____

Your Signature:_____

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact Dr. Adele Crudden or Dr. Lynn McBroom at (601) 325-2001.

Appendix C
Consumer Background Form

Appendix C: Consumer Background Form

Background Information

1. Your name: _____

2. Years of formal education: _____

3. What is your work status?

( ) Working (employed)
( ) Homemaker or unpaid family worker
( ) Retired
( ) Unemployed and looking for work?
( ) Unemployed and not looking for work?

4. If you are employed, how many years have you been in this job?

5. Have you ever received assistance from a vocational rehabilitation agency?

( ) No
( ) Yes

6. Do you have a disability?

( ) No
( ) Yes, visual disability
( ) Yes, mobility disability
( ) Yes, other. Describe: _____

Appendix D
Employer Protocol

Appendix D: Employer Protocol

Introduction and Script

Good morning and welcome to our session. Thank you for joining our discussion on overcoming barriers to employment. My name is _____ and this is _____ and we work at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University. You were asked to participate in this focus group because you are all employers and have worked in some way with persons with disabilities. Let's stop here for a moment and let everyone quickly introduce themselves? Would each person give their name, where they work, and where they are from?

Today, we'll be discussing what can be done to overcome barriers to employment for people with visual impairments. We really want to know about unique and innovative methods that you use or may have heard about that have assisted a person with a visual impairment in becoming employed. There are no wrong answers, but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

Before we begin, let me suggest some things that will make our discussion more productive. Please speak up - only one person should speak at a time. We're tape recording this session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. We'll be on a first-name basis, but in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. You may be assured of confidentiality.

My role here is to ask questions and listen. I won't be participating in the conversation, but I want you to feel free to talk with one another. I'll be asking a few questions, and I'll be moving the discussion from one question to the next. There is a tendency in these discussions for some people to talk a lot and some people not to say much. But it is important for us to hear from each of you because you have different experiences. So if one of you is sharing a lot, I may ask you to let others talk. And if you aren't saying much, I may ask for your opinion. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names.

1. Please tell us about your hiring process, as well as your initial reaction to hiring a person who is blind or visually impaired.

   What type(s) of job(s) are held by persons who are blind or visually impaired in your business? Do these positions have promotion or career ladder potential?

   How were you able to ensure that blind or visually impaired employees are fully included in all phases of your business's operation? How did other employees react?

You have success in assisting persons who are blind in overcoming some barriers to employment. Let's talk about what some of the successful strategies are.

2. The number one barrier, as identified by a survey of employed persons who are blind, is employer attitudes. What methods have you seen that are successful in overcoming the barrier of employers' attitudes?

   Ok, let me summarize what you have said.... Does anyone have any additional advice about employer's attitudes before we move to the next issue?

3. Transportation continues to be a significant barrier for many persons, particularly in rural areas. If this was a problem for your employee(s), how was it solved?

   Summarize and ask for additional advice about overcoming transportation barriers....

4. Consumers have also identified access to print as a major barrier to employment. What accommodations were necessary to ensure that your visually impaired employees have access to printed material?

   Summarize and ask for additional advice about overcoming print access barriers....

Ending: Any other comments? Close: Thank members for participation.

Appendix E
Employer Information Form

Appendix E: Employer Information Form

Background Information

1. Your name: _____

2. Years of formal education (circle the appropriate number)

   12 13 14 15 16 17 18 18+

3. Which of the following best describes your business?

( ) For-profit business or industry
( ) Not-for-profit business or industry
( ) Other. Describe: _____

4. Which of the following best describes your occupation?

( ) Officer of company
( ) Human resources or personnel
( ) Management
( ) Other. Describe: _____

5. How many years have you been with this company?

6. Does your company employ anyone with a disability?

( ) No
( ) Yes, visual disability
( ) Yes, mobility disability
( ) Yes, other. Describe:
_____

7. Do you have a disability?

( ) No
( ) Yes, visual disability
( ) Yes, mobility disability
( ) Yes, other. Describe: _____